

A RACE NOT TO BE LOST

Italy's Historic 'Mille Miglia' Continues its Run

BY BARBARA TORREVELTRI, ED. D.

A 1955 Porsche 550 Spyder RS on Furlo Pass (Gola del Furlo) in the Marche region gives a glimpse of what the original Mille Miglia would have looked like. (Massimo Campanari)

In the medieval Tuscan city of Siena, visitors and locals alike line the narrow streets and press against the 12th century chiseled stone buildings to give space for the classic cars. We garner an up-close-and-personal look at each passing model. In a city accustomed to horses, pedestrians strolling along narrow streets, and throngs of tourists, idling engines take today's center stage. The annual reenactment of the *Mille Miglia* (1,000 Miles) runs once again.

Spectacularly preserved vintage autos glisten in the midday sun. Each vehicle is a collector's dream. Authentic radiant steel frames, polished chrome, sparkling headlights, and trademarked insignia identify iconic brands.

They parade in single file. These certified vintage treasures are a museum on wheels. Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Fiat, Lancia, and Maserati from Italy; Aston Martin, Healy, Jaguar, Lagonda, and Triumph from the United Kingdom; BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, and Volkswagen from Germany; Bugatti, Citroen, Peugeot, and Renault from France; Buick, Chrysler, Ford, and La Salle from the United States.

Today's re-enactment is a far cry from the original Mille Miglia. The legendary race, once defined as "the most beautiful race in the world," debuted in 1927 in Brescia,

a city and province in the eastern part of the Lombardy region. It was formed when a 23-year-old Northern Italian aristocrat, Count Aymo Maggi, and his *compagni*, Franco Mazzotti and Giovanni Canestrini, sought to replace the



A red 1951 Ferrari 212 Export driven by Bernhard Sieber during a time trial near Buonconvento, Siena. (Roberto Cerruti)



Vintage cars in Brescia at the 2017 Mille Miglia. (Paolo Bona)

Italian Grand Prix (*Gran Premio d'Italia*) that relocated from their beloved town of Brescia to Monza (north of Milan), where it continues today.

Back then, speed racers navigated hairpin turns at perilous speeds, drove through the dark of night, and sped on rain-slicked roads with one goal in mind: finishing first in their class. The motorcar race was a sporting event in which investors and racers hailed from veritable royalty. The race captured the world's attention and gained international press. On April 12, 1931, the front page of *The New York Times* heralded the race that was "watched by more than 1,000,000 spectators who lined the all-Italy route" from Brescia to Rome and back.

Over the years, Italians dominated the race, with most wins by manufacturer (Alfa Romeo), driver (Clemente Biondetti), and even car color (racing red). Meanwhile, Italian crews piloted many international entries to victory.

Vintage sport car O.M. 665 SMM Superba (1930) in Colle di Val d'Elsa, Tuscany. (Erness)

The Mille Miglia served as a testing ground for auto designers to outperform their international rivals. Back then, every crash and winning performance was being analyzed by engineers who used the race to develop future

Automotive history was made in the 1940 Mille Miglia, a race limited to only nine laps (that MM punts are not eager to validate), when Enzo Ferrari, formerly designer/racer at Alfa Romeo, debuted two of his own red racers under the banner, Auto Avio Costruzioni.



designs. The open road speed and endurance race was notably cavalier, boasting no speed limits, no restrictions, no protective barriers, no safety gear, and for all intents and purposes, no brakes.

“All the original qualifier models had drum brakes, which would get hot while racing and burn up,” stated Bob Torre, owner of two vintage cars that qualify for today’s Mille Miglia. “That was a huge risk for the drivers, who probably calculated how to preserve brakes by not using them.”

The risk was not limited to just those in the driver’s seat. In 1938, ten spectators were killed prompting Mussolini to suspend the race for the following year. In 1957, tragedy struck again. With ground to make up and no time to attend to a jutting bumper that eventually punctured a tire, 28-year-old Spanish aristocrat Alfonso De Portago—godson of the King of Spain—lost control of his 12-cylinder Ferrari going at a reported speed of 120 mph. The vehicle crashed into a telegraph pole and then flew into the audience, killing five children, five adults, de Portago, and his co-driver. The legendary Mille Miglia speed race was no match for the public outcry that ensued. With the support of the church and state officials, the race was put to an end.

It was two decades before the Mille Miglia’s revival, although no longer in the same format. Today’s race is slower (and saner), though drivers do have the opportunity to crank up the engine and drive their vehicles at speeds they were designed for once they reach Italy’s autostrade.

Nick Soprano of Westchester County, New York, is a car collector and racing enthusiast who participated in four of the modern Mille Miglia races between 1986 and 2002.



An old Fiat transit in Tuscany on the second leg. (Alessandro Colle)



A red 1938 Fiat 508 and brown 1940 Alfa Romeo 6C drive by Piazza San Pietro in Rome. (Roberto Ceruti)

“In Italy, auto enthusiasts and artisans keep the dream alive,” Soprano said. “Driving my 1957 Ferrari 250 GTO in the Retro Miglia Mille was a multi-dimensional sensory experience. There was the driving, sound, look, and feel. I was reliving my passionate dream for cars from when I was three years old.”

The Mille Miglia’s vintage autos represent passions turned investments, the cars themselves worth millions. Each of today’s entries traces its auto lineage (and perhaps even its chassis) to models that raced in one of the original 24 Miglia Mille races that took place between 1927 and 1957. Getting the cars there, however, can be quite the journey itself.

“For the 2002 race, we sent the car by Air Transport,” Soprano said. “Our shock absorbers collapsed. We had them rebuilt in Italy by experienced automotive experts. The craftsmanship dates back generations. It confirms a sense of artisanship of the Italian people.”

In 1955, the race was completed in 10 hours by an Englishman driving a Mercedes. Sir Sterling Moss beat the competition from 520 other race participants to complete the 1,000 miles, averaging 100 miles per hour!

Entrants are assigned a race number and also a rating, known as a co-efficient. The composition of the final co-efficient, which contributes to points necessary for a win, considers: *Period* (year of construction), *Class* (engine’s cubic capacity), *MM factor* (models that won

in their category during 1927-1957 speed races), **MM bonus** (chassis ran in original races), and **Categories** (such as *Touring (T)*, *Grand Touring (GT)*, *Production Sport (SP)*, *Sport (S)*, *Super Sport pre-war (SS)*, and *Race Sport (post-war) (SC)*).

This safer version of the Mille Miglia makes it more crowd-friendly as well. Local police cars serve as escorts for the racers who access pedestrian-only streets. They also serve to keep the drivers and autos moving on schedule. These rare, vintage, high-end European automobiles receive applause and cheers from the crowd of onlookers.

Drivers and navigators—decked out in period race gear, caps, gloves, and colorful jackets—take selfies with random tourists. They relish the opportunity to pause and take in the crowd, as their regimented schedule requires them to hit the road at 5:00 a.m. and make stops in every location.

The route crisscrosses Italy in four separate legs:

- 1st leg** - Brescia – Ferrara – Cervia – Milano Marittimo
- 2nd leg** - Cervia – San Marino – Arezzo – Orvieto – Roma (for the night parade across the eternal city)
- 3rd leg** - Roma – Radicofani – Monteriggioni – Lucca – Siena – Sarzana – Parma
- 4th leg** - Parma – Lodi – Autodromo di Monza – Brescia

As I look on in Siena and racers take a scheduled break for *pranzo*, my gaze focuses on the magnificent entry in front of me: #44, a vintage Lagonda British Luxury model from the Aston Martin car family. The car and its drivers are Mille Miglia veterans. Etched in white paint on the forest green passenger’s side door panel is a sequential



The Mille Miglia Museum in Brescia.



The route for the 2018 Mille Miglia.

list of Mille Miglia race years—eight in total. This race was its ninth, and I think to myself, *This car must know the route to the finish line in Milano by heart.*

A 1931 Alfa Romeo shifts into low gear in front of me as it prepares for the uphill climb.

“Che bellissima!” I yell to the race team.

The driver waves and the co-pilot shakes my hand—we are *that* close. He shouts out details about his precious, high-end collectible, before continuing in the procession.

“Avanti!” he shouts.

Barbara Torre Veltri, Ed. D. is an associate professor of Social Studies Education at Northern Arizona University who led an Education Study Abroad in Italy in 2018. She thanks Nick Soprano and Bob Torre for contributing their expertise to this article.



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